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Debate

The Soviet Famine of 1932–1933 Reconsidered

HIROAKI KUROMIYA

Abstract

Recent advances in research on the 1932–1933 Soviet famine, most notably the monograph by R. W. Davies and S. G. Wheatcroft [2004, *The Years of Hunger: Soviet Agriculture, 1931–1933* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan)], have generated a debate, involving Michael Ellman and Mark Tauger, on the pages of this journal. The present essay re-examines this debate in two areas: intentionality (did Stalin cause the famine in order to kill millions?) and the Ukrainian factor (was the famine a Ukrainian ethnic genocide?). I argue that there is not enough evidence to answer in the affirmative. The essay concludes by discussing the international context of the famine as a factor of critical importance.

THE SOVIET FAMINE OF 1932–1933 (THE ‘GREAT FAMINE’) is a complex historical event and it has generated much controversy. The recent publication by Davies and Wheatcroft (2004) has renewed the controversy, with Michael Ellman and Mark Tauger taking critical views of the extensively researched monograph (Ellman 2006; Davies & Wheatcroft 2006; Tauger 2006; Ellman 2007). There is little doubt that the famine was a man-made famine in the sense of Amartya Sen’s famous thesis that no famine takes place under democracy: politics is to blame for modern famines, including the Soviet famine of 1932–1933 (Sen 1999). Tauger emphasises that the 1932 harvest was exceptionally small, much smaller than most scholars acknowledge, but this does not preclude the man-made nature of the Great Famine: if the Soviet government had been willing to accept external aid or shifted trade priority, the famine could have been averted or would have been much more limited in nature. Regarding the question of whether the Great Famine constitutes genocide, Ellman is persuasive when he argues that in the end it all depends on the definition of genocide: if a relaxed definition of genocide (Stalin ‘knew or should have known’ the implication of his agricultural policy) is applied, the Great Famine constitutes genocide, so do the Atlantic slave trade, the atom bomb on Nagasaki, the economic sanctions of the 1990s against Iraq and many others (Ellman 2007, p. 688).

Three issues remain. First, did Stalin intend to kill the millions of people, in other words, was the famine premeditated mass killings by Stalin? (If the answer is yes, it would fit the definition of genocide more narrowly defined.) Second, did Stalin target

ethnic Ukrainians for starvation, in other words, was the famine an ethnic (Ukrainian) genocide? Third, can the Great Famine be understood outside of the international context? The present article seeks to re-examine these issues.

Intentionality

Stalin and other Bolshevik leaders were not averse to killing *per se*. They believed in the ‘class struggle’ against their enemies and indeed lived in the ‘killing fields’ during the civil war. The Politburo sanctioned the execution of numerous people for political crimes in the relatively peaceful 1920s and beyond. Similarly they sanctioned numerous killings associated with collectivisation and de-kulakisation. Stalin, Molotov and others signed numerous execution orders at the time of the Great Terror (1937–1938). Tellingly, Stalin’s right-hand man, Vyacheslav Molotov, readily acknowledged that he had signed death warrants against untold numbers of Soviet citizens in 1937–1938 (Chuev 1991, pp. 439–40), even though he denied, until the end of his life, the very existence of the ‘imperialist’ secret protocol to the 1939 Non-Aggression (Molotov–Ribbentrop) Pact with Nazi Germany. Therefore it would hardly be surprising if Stalin and his associates had meant to kill masses of people through artificial famine.

One must ask whether there is any evidence that such premeditated mass killings through famine took place, and whether Stalin would have shrunk from declaring such an intention to starve politically unreliable peasants *en masse* as class enemies. Although Adolf Hitler intentionally and deliberately killed millions of Jews and others whom he considered ‘sub-humans’, he appears to have taken trouble not to leave actual decisions and orders of mass killings in writing. Did he fear that ultimately his actions were not justified morally? Stalin and his entourage, on the other hand, believed in their terror against the ‘enemies’, and did not seem to have harboured such fears. Evidence that Stalin meant to kill millions of people through starvation may surface. Such evidence, whether written or oral, would put an end to the controversy on the Great Famine. What evidence exists now?

Ellman refers to Stalin’s expression ‘a knockout blow’ (which he used in his November 1932 speech) as implying Stalin’s hidden intention (Ellman 2006, p. 830). It could be construed as rhetorical even if resolute, ominous and sinister. Similarly, the Ukrainian party leader, Stanislav Kosior, used a telling expression in March 1933: ‘the hunger has not yet taught many collective farmers good sense (*umu-razumu*)’, meaning the need to work well on the collective farm fields (Ellman 2006, p. 830). This, too, like Stalin’s remark, does not necessarily indicate an intention to kill masses of people through starvation. The strongest evidence I have found is a remark by Lazar Kaganovich. According to Genrikh Lyushkov, an OGPU official who accompanied the Politburo delegation to the North Caucasus in early November 1932, Kaganovich said, ‘even if some *kolkhozniki* die, they are paying for their own mistakes’ (Ryushukofu 1939, p. 75). Lyushkov and other members of the delegation (which included the OGPU chief Genrikh Yagoda) understood that Kaganovich was carrying out the instructions of Stalin in the North Caucasus. Before the departure of the delegation, the Politburo had adopted a resolution, drafted by Kaganovich, which declared that the delegation’s task was to ‘crush sabotage of sowing and grain

collections, organised by counter-revolutionary *kulak* elements in the Kuban' (Vasil'iev & Shapoval 2001, p. 250). When Lyushkov drew Kaganovich's attention to the fact that people were dying from starvation, he responded:

What? If they starve to death, it's their fault. There is no need to save those dying. Instead, what has to be done is first of all to make the *kolkhozniki* work hard and make them understand the power of the [Bolshevik] government. If two or three hundred people are let die, it will teach the others a good lesson. (Ryushukofu 1939, p. 75)¹

Lyushkov noted down these remarks in 1939 after he defected to Manchukuo and Japan, so they may have to be taken with a grain of salt.

Whatever the case, there is no doubt that Stalin and his supporters indeed did not help the starving and instead allowed them to die. In the midst of the famine, grain was still being exported. Furthermore, Moscow did not release its (small) strategic grain stock to feed the hungry.² Had Moscow stopped all grain exports and released all strategic grain reserves, the available 2.6 million tons of grain, under optimal conditions of distribution, might have saved up to 7.8 million lives, which was the approximate number of actual deaths from the 1932–1933 famine. (In fact, however, much grain was stolen or spoilt.) Of course, Moscow did not release the grain reserves, even in the face of mass starvation. Its priority was not feeding hungry peasants, but feeding the workers and soldiers. (Even then, many urban residents, especially in grain-consuming regions of the country, starved to death.) All this does not necessarily signify that Moscow meant to kill people in their millions, although it is likely that Moscow meant to use at least a limited scale of famine as a form of punishment and a lesson. Ellman reminds us that Stalin singled out two or three groups: 'class enemies', 'idlers' and 'thieves' for punishment (Ellman 2007, p. 665). After all, small famines were not rare in the Soviet Union; small-scale regional and provincial famines took place frequently, even in the relatively prosperous NEP period of the 1920s (Kuromiya 1998, pp. 133, 135; Tauger 2001). Such famines, whether 'natural' or 'man-made', did not spell out national crisis.

Lack of direct evidence of Stalin's intention to kill millions through famine does not mean that Stalin did not intend to do so. Circumstantial evidence, however, suggests that it is not likely that Stalin intended to kill millions. Firstly, as Ellman (2006, 2007), and Davies and Wheatcroft (2004, 2006) emphasise, Stalin did extend some relief in spite of his belligerent rhetoric. In 1932 and 1933, Moscow curtailed grain collection plans for Ukraine, Kazakhstan, the Crimea, the North Caucasus, the Lower Volga, the Urals, the Central Black-earth Region and Eastern Siberia on nine occasions. Moscow also offered grain and food assistance to these regions (Danilov *et al.* 2001, p. 862; Vasil'iev & Shapoval 2001, p. 270). Secondly, on a number of occasions, starting with Stalin's opposition to increasing grain export in September 1931,

¹On the Kaganovich delegation, see Davies and Wheatcroft (2004, pp. 175–78) and Vasil'iev and Shapoval (2001, pp. 250–72).

²Observers once suspected that the country possessed a vast secret grain stock in 1932 and 1933. Now it has become apparent that this was not the case. The goal of an untouchable strategic grain stock was never achieved in those years. In July 1932 the country had only one month's stock of grain (even less in Ukraine) and in the spring of 1933 only about four to six weeks' supply (Davies *et al.* 1995, p. 651).

Moscow curtailed grain exports. In fact, Moscow even clandestinely purchased grain abroad to feed the hungry nation (Khlevnyuk *et al.* 2001, p. 80; Gintsburg 1999, pp. 124, 126). Yet these measures were too late and too limited in scope to prevent widespread famine.

Third, the fact that Moscow imposed an information curfew on the existence of mass famine in the country also suggests that the millions of deaths in 1932–1933 may not have been premeditated. If Stalin had intended to kill millions, he could have prepared a justification for it just as he had for wholesale collectivisation and de-kulakisation in 1929–1930. He did justify the political repression (arrest, exile and execution) of numerous people by branding them as enemies. Yet he steadfastly denied the fact that millions of people died from starvation. It is possible that he could not bring himself to declare that after the brutal campaigns of wholesale collectivisation and de-kulakisation there still were millions of enemies in the country. Yet in 1937–1938, after Stalin declared the ‘victory of socialism’ in the Soviet Union, he staged the Great Terror in which Lenin’s former close associates were openly tried (and executed) as foreign spies and nearly a million people were executed as enemies of the people. Had Stalin intended to kill millions of people in 1932–1933, he could have openly justified the famine-terror even if he did not wish to disclose its full scale.

Moreover, if Stalin had intended to kill millions of people through famine, his intention would have to have been understood and realised by those surrounding him from the Kremlin all the way down to the village activists who mercilessly confiscated grain in the villages. Of course, Stalin may have used Aesopian language, euphemism, or subtle suggestion. It may be that Stalin did not give a direct order but merely implied his intention to his subordinates. If that is the case, it seems likely that some evidence or subtle hints of his implied intention to kill masses of peasants through starvation would have surfaced in one form or another somewhere along the chain of command from the Kremlin to the village level. Yet there have been few, if any, such hints.

The question of magnitude becomes important here. Stalin did let some people starve. Yet Stalin does not appear to have anticipated the deaths of millions of people. The millions of deaths de-stabilised the country politically and generated political doubt about his leadership even within the party (most famously the Ryutin platform). Stalin was not prepared for this eventuality and could not acknowledge that he had misread the situation.

This point also suggests that Ellman’s contention that Stalin used the famine as a cheap alternative to mass deportations is not entirely convincing. He points out the discrepancy between the numbers of planned deportations and the much lower numbers of actual deportations and concludes that the discrepancy ‘partly reflected the success of this alternative method of dealing with recalcitrant peasants’ (Ellman 2006, p. 831). Yet by the time the deportation plans were being drawn up in the early months of 1933, the famine was already well under way and measures that contributed to the rapid increase in the number of deaths (such as placing entire villages on the so-called black list, confiscating not only their grain but other food provisions and enforcing a trade embargo on them) had been widely implemented. Moreover, Stalin was always interested in taking control by repressive measures: arrests, deportations and executions. By contrast, the outcome and extent of famine, by its very nature and however executed, would be impossible to predict. Moreover, the targeted ‘enemies’

might cunningly escape starvation. It is difficult to believe that Stalin would have left such loose ends. The famine may have turned out to be a cheaper alternative to deportations, but it is unlikely that it was intended to be so from the beginning.³

At the present state of knowledge, one cannot conclude that Stalin intended to kill millions of people through famine. Nor did he propagate the ‘famine-terror’. On the contrary he hid it. It is likely, however, that Stalin originally intended to use famine on a limited scale as political terror.

The Ukrainian question

Those who study the Great Famine from the perspective of the USSR as a whole tend to negate the specific Ukrainian factor: that the famine was in essence terror intended against ethnic Ukrainians, or a Ukrainian genocide. On the other hand, those who focus on Ukraine tend to support the Ukrainian genocide theory. The former group stresses that, after all, the famine affected areas far beyond Ukraine *per se*. It is true that Ukraine suffered much more than Russia proper. If one engages in the numbers game, however, Kazakhstan was harder hit than Ukraine. Russian historians passionately deny that the famine was essentially anti-Ukrainian because in fact between two and three million died of famine in Russia in 1932–1933.⁴ One might counter that just as the fact that not only Jews but Gypsies and others were killed in the Holocaust does not negate the Holocaust’s fundamentally anti-Semitic nature, so too the fact that many non-Ukrainians died in the famine does not negate its anti-Ukrainian nature. This is an argument that must be taken seriously.

The 1932–1933 famine hit Ukraine (and the North Caucasus with its large ethnic Ukrainian population) generally much harder than Russia proper. There are easily identifiable reasons for this. Ukrainian peasants who enjoyed fertile soil were normally regarded as more prosperous than Russian peasants and therefore were more suspect politically. In the North Caucasus, the former Kuban Cossacks, largely descendants of the Ukrainian or Zaporizhian Cossacks, had constituted a privileged class and had long been politically suspect in Moscow’s eyes. In early 1932 Ukrainian Communists had begun to warn Moscow about serious food shortages in Ukraine, but Moscow distrusted the Ukrainians, suspecting that such warnings were a Ukrainian ruse to extract concessions in grain procurement quotas from Moscow. This was the case even though Stalin knew of serious problems (famine and death) in Ukraine. In a letter to Molotov and Kaganovich dated 18 June 1932, for example, Stalin even mentions ‘famine’ in Ukraine (Khlevnyuk *et al.* 2001, p. 179). In the summer of 1932 Molotov reported to the Politburo after returning from Ukraine: ‘We are indeed faced with the spectre of famine and in rich grain districts to boot’ (Kuromiya 1998, p. 167).⁵ On 11

³In the 11 August 1932 letter to Kaganovich, Stalin emphasised that to transform the famine-stricken Ukraine into a real *fortress* of the USSR ‘we should not stint money’ (Khlevnyuk *et al.* 2001, p. 274 [emphasis Stalin’s]).

⁴The Moscow journal *Rodina* has just begun to publish a dialogue between Russian and Ukrainian historians about the Great Famine. See ‘Golod po-bolshevistski: organizatory i vdokhnoviteli’, *Rodina*, 8, 2007.

⁵More generally on the role played by Molotov and Kaganovich in the 1932–1933 famine, see Vasil’iev and Shapoval (2001).

August, Stalin, in his letter to Kaganovich, warned that ‘if we don’t make an effort now to improve the situation in Ukraine, we may lose Ukraine’ (Khlevnyuk *et al.* 2001, p. 274).⁶ This led to grain procurement targets being slightly curtailed. The targets, however, were still far too unrealistic and the procurement campaign proved extraordinarily brutal from the autumn of 1932 onward. Only in Ukraine and the North Caucasus (thus not in Russia proper) were extreme measures taken against individual collective farms and villages for failures in procurement: a complete economic blockade (seizure of all foodstuffs, not merely grain but meat and other products, banning of import of foodstuffs to the villages); arrests of Communists in responsible positions; and wholesale deportations of peasants (collective and individual farmers) (Zelenin *et al.* 1994, pp. 258, 260).⁷ In January 1933, Moscow ordered the closure of the borders with Ukraine and the Northern Caucasus in order to prevent massive migration of peasants out of these areas (Danilov *et al.* 2001, pp. 634–35).

It is difficult to argue, however, that these orders were specifically directed against ethnic Ukrainians, considering that both ethnic Ukrainians and Russians lived on either side of the border, and border guards could not have distinguished between them since peasants did not carry passports. The Ukrainian historian Stanyslav Kul’chyts’kyi notes that the pattern of famine death in Ukraine was not ethnic but residential. Ethnic Russians and Jews, more urban than Ukrainians, survived the famine more successfully than Ukrainians, but proportionately speaking, as many ethnic Poles or Bulgarians (most of whom lived in the countryside) as ethnic Ukrainians, died in the famine (Kul’chyts’kyi 2002, p. 15).⁸ There are hints that Moscow had all along harboured distrust of ethnic Ukrainians. Kaganovich, according to Nikita Khrushchev, ‘was fond of saying that every Ukrainian is potentially a nationalist’ (Khrushchev 1970, p. 172). Already in 1929 a serious attack against the Ukrainian intelligentsia began, in the form of the fabricated Union for the Liberation of Ukraine trial which was held in Kharkiv in 1930, and continued and spread to much wider circles through the 1930s and beyond (Prystaiko & Shapoval 1995). Yet these facts do not necessarily mean that Moscow deliberately engineered the mass famine in Ukraine to punish ethnic Ukrainians, and in particular peasants.

One could argue that Ukraine and the North Caucasus were punished as territorial units with large (often predominantly) ethnic Ukrainian peasant populations. If modern democratic politics is territorial politics vying for votes, then Stalinist politics may not have been radically different save for the concern for votes.

The Ukrainian genocide theory assumes that Moscow fundamentally distrusted ethnic Ukrainians (and peasants in particular as a political base of Ukrainian nationalism). Stalin distrusted all peasants. Yet, given Moscow’s Russo-centric position, Ukrainian peasants were doubly suspect both for being peasants and for being Ukrainian whereas Russian peasants were suspect only for being peasants and

⁶Stalin repeated ‘We may lose Ukraine’ twice.

⁷For the 18 November 1932 order of the Central Committee of the Ukrainian Communist Party on these measures, see Pyrih (1990, p. 256).

⁸Kul’chyts’kyi bases his conclusion on the data of ZAGS (*Otdely Zapisi Aktov Grazhdanskogo Sostoyaniya*), or Civil Registry Office.

not for being Russians (Kuromiya 1994). Indeed, from Moscow's point of view, the political records of Ukrainian peasants were not good. Ukrainian peasants had voted overwhelmingly for Ukrainian parties in the 1917–1918 constituent assembly elections, and had fought obstinately against the Bolsheviks (and the Whites) during the civil war. Nearly half of all peasant uprisings against collectivisation in 1930 took place in Ukraine. Certainly, one can argue that Moscow used the famine for political ends, but this does not mean that it intentionally caused famine as an ethnic genocide.

When, in the 1920s, Moscow promoted Ukrainianisation as part of the *korenizatsiia* policy to placate national minorities, it hoped that this would ensure peace and stability in Ukraine. Even though the Ukrainian peasants had voted overwhelmingly for Ukrainian parties in the 1917–1918 constituent assembly elections, their political actions in the subsequent civil war did not demonstrate that they were invariably loyal to the Ukrainian cause. Like many peasants elsewhere, they were concerned first of all with local interests and followed local leaders and *otamans* (hetmans), rejecting the Bolsheviks but also rejecting the Central *Rada* (which allied itself with the Germans) and the Directory (which allied itself with the Poles). Although they rejected the Bolsheviks, they rejected the Whites even more passionately, and in the end came to terms with the Bolsheviks. After the end of the Civil War, Moscow was not overly concerned about the danger of promoting Ukrainianisation in Ukraine. Of course, Ukrainian nationalism was not acceptable, but evidently Moscow believed that respect for Ukrainian national sentiments in cultural, administrative and educational matters would be a political asset rather than a liability. This had the added political benefit of keeping politically weak the Soviet Union's western neighbour, Poland, which dared to attack the Bolsheviks and to capture Belarus and Ukraine in 1919 and 1920; Poland contained large numbers of ethnic Ukrainians and Belarusians whose plight under Polish rule proved an excellent propaganda tool for the Bolsheviks. The Bolsheviks used Ukrainianisation to court politically those Western Ukrainians under Polish rule whose fight against Polish authorities was a major political headache for Warsaw (Snyder 2005, chs 1–4).

It was only towards the end of 1932, not, say, in late 1931 or early 1932, that Moscow began to reverse the Ukrainianisation policy (Pyrih 1990, pp. 291–92; Vasil'iev & Shapoval 2001, pp. 310–12). What seems to be the case is that the deepening famine crisis led Moscow to conclude that the Ukrainian peasants, whose political loyalty Moscow had long courted through the policy of Ukrainianisation, had become more dangerous politically than ethnic Russian peasants in Russia proper. It was this conclusion that led to harsher political and economic terror in Ukraine and the Northern Caucasus than in Russia proper. The year 1933 witnessed an open attack on Ukrainian national communism culminating in the suicide of the man embodying it, Mykola Skrypnyk, and the uncovering of various 'counter-revolutionary' Ukrainian nationalist organisations (Kostiuk 1960, pp. 94–95). The harsh terror, in turn, aggravated the famine in Ukraine and the North Caucasus.⁹

To support the Ukrainian genocide theory, one needs evidence that the Kremlin explicitly or implicitly discriminated against ethnic Ukrainians. In terms of grain

⁹Martin (2001, p. 303) notes that 'the national interpretation, then, was not a cause of the grain requisitions crisis and famine. Rather, it emerged as a consequence of it'.

collections, grain and food assistance, one needs to find evidence that the ethnic Ukrainians were intentionally more harshly treated than the ethnic Russians. It remains to be shown that owing to directives from above, the ethnic Russian peasants in Ukraine fared much better than the ethnic Ukrainian peasants in Ukraine. An examination of ethnically mixed areas is called for. In Russia, for instance, the southern parts of Voronezh were heavily inhabited by ethnic Ukrainians; in some districts more than three quarters of the population were ethnic Ukrainians, the vast majority of whom spoke Ukrainian. How did they fare in the famine in comparison with their Russian neighbours? Another telling test would be the Far East. The northern districts of the Vladivostok area, for instance, were also heavily populated by ethnic Ukrainians who in certain districts, accounted for more than half of the population.¹⁰ Did they suffer from hunger more than their non-Ukrainian neighbours and, if so, was it because of the anti-Ukrainian policy of Moscow? There are no clear answers yet.

The foreign factor

An important factor that is often missing from the debate on the Great Famine concerns foreign relations. Normally, when foreign relations are discussed at all, the German factor (Hitler's ascension to power in January 1933) dominates the discussion. Yet the Japanese and Poles seem to have been more significant.

The famine took place in the midst of foreign threats. Japan's military invasion of Manchuria in 1931 and the setting up of a puppet government, Manchukuo, in February 1932 dramatically increased threats from the east (Haslam 1992). Having built in Manchuria an advance post directly facing the Soviet Union, Japan posed an immediate threat, as was well known to Stalin. The Soviet secret police, for instance, intercepted a memorandum sent by the Japanese Ambassador in Moscow Kōki Hirota. Dated 19 December 1931, Hirota's note expressed the following opinion to the Japanese General Staff in Tokyo:

On the question of whether Japan should declare war on the Soviet Union—I deem it necessary that Japan be ready to declare war at any moment and to adopt a tough policy towards the Soviet Union. The cardinal objective of this war must lie not so much in protecting Japan from Communism as in seizing the Soviet Far East and Eastern Siberia.

Stalin read and circulated this memo among his entourage (Khaustov *et al.* 2003, pp. 292, 295) and he immediately began to reinforce the Far Eastern military forces to counter Japan. Stalin's attempts to placate Japan by offering a non-aggression treaty were repeatedly rejected by Japan (Terayama 2005, pp. 89–110).

Stalin also suspected that Japan was extending into Mongolia and Xinjiang, close to the strategic areas of West Siberia and the Urals. In Xinjiang, from the spring of 1931 onwards, numerous rebellions by disaffected peasants and Muslims took place against the Chinese government. Sensing Japanese (and British) influence among the rebels, Stalin, against the wishes of the Comintern, made the decision not to help the rebels but instead to assist the Chinese government by providing weapons and even aircraft.

¹⁰On the eastern diaspora population of ethnic Ukrainians, see Naulko (1993).

In 1933 Stalin went so far as to despatch, clandestinely, special military forces to Xinjiang to crush the rebellions (Barmin 1999, pp. 97–126). In Mongolia, the collectivisation of agriculture, the abolition of private trade and other socialising policies caused landholders and priests to rebel against the Soviet-supported government in the spring of 1932. Descrying Japanese (and Chinese) hands among the rebels, Stalin worked to restrain the Mongolian government from such hasty attempts at Sovietisation (Adibekov *et al.* 2004, pp. 661–65).

It was probably around this time that Stalin admitted, according to Karl Radek, that he feared a simultaneous Japanese–Polish attack (Fischer 1969, p. 222). To secure the western borders, the Soviet Union courted Poland, Estonia, Latvia and Finland and signed non-aggression pacts with each of them between January and August of 1932. (Negotiations with Romania failed owing to the disputes over Bessarabia.) According to Dyboski, a contemporary Polish observer, like other western states bordering the Soviet Union, Poland understood that ‘for [the] very good reason [that] Russia [the Soviet Union] is far too busy in the far east to have any wish for trouble with Poland’. Poland, furthermore, was ‘inclined to believe that we now have the most desirable type of Bolshevik Government that we could have’ (Dyboski 1934, pp. 235, 238).

It is possible that Stalin sacrificed starving people within the Soviet Union because he was concerned about an external threat: he had to feed the soldiers first and build up the military, particularly in the Far East. In May 1932, Stalin sent a telegram informing Eastern Siberia that an additional three million poods (1 pood = 16.38 kg) of grain had already been bought in Canada and that the grain would reach Vladivostok. Stalin assured the Far East and Eastern Siberia that they would receive their due portions and asked them to ensure the delivery of the remainder to Western Siberia (Danilov *et al.* 2001, p. 365). One might argue that in such a tense international environment Stalin would not have intentionally caused a large-scale famine which would politically de-stabilise the country. Yet others might counter that the securing of the western borderlands gave Stalin a relatively free hand in the west of the country, particularly in Ukraine. However, Moscow suspected rightly that Poland continued to engage in extensive intelligence against the Soviet Union, regarding it as a potential enemy. Certainly Stalin took advantage of the famine to eliminate anyone in the famine-affected areas (in Ukraine in particular) suspected of disloyalty to the Soviet government.

If Stalin in fact victimised the Ukrainians (which has yet to be proved), the result was the de-stabilising of the western border areas of the country. Information on the famine leaked abroad in spite of the Soviet government’s tight information control. The brutal collectivisation and de-kulakisation campaigns, followed by the Great Famine, disillusioned ethnic Ukrainians in Poland and elsewhere about the Soviet Union and greatly activated the Ukrainian *émigré* groups against the Soviet Union. Foreign countries, Germany, Poland and Japan in particular, sought to use the disaffected Ukrainians abroad for political and military purposes. Across the Polish borders, contingents of *émigré* Ukrainian agents were despatched to the Soviet Union for espionage and diversion.¹¹ Germany provided all kinds of assistance to the

¹¹Data on these agents are in Mikulicz (1971, pp. 110–15).

Ukrainian *émigré* groups, the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (*Orhanizatsiya Ukrayins'kykh Natsionalistiv*, OUN) in particular (Viedenieiev & Bystrukhin 2006, p. 111). Especially after Poland signed a non-aggression pact with the Soviet Union, some Ukrainians, disappointed with Poland, turned to Japan for assistance, believing that war between Japan and the Soviet Union would be inevitable. Japan willingly supported the Ukrainians, both in the west and in the Far East, and the Soviet Union knew about these activities (Sotskov 2003, pp. 75–81), partly because Soviet agents had penetrated many of the Ukrainian *émigré* groups.

Similarly, the North Caucasus, with its Ukrainian population and many other non-Russian nationalities, drew the attention of foreign countries, Germany, Poland, Turkey and Japan in particular, as a fertile ground for espionage and subversion. Poland's anti-Soviet scheme in the Caucasus is well known, as part of its grander scheme called 'Prometheism' (Mikulicz 1971; Snyder 2005). Japan's scheme is less known, but its activities to exert its influence on the peoples of the Caucasus and the Muslim population of the Soviet Union were closely watched by the Soviet intelligence. After World War II, the Soviet Union submitted numerous intercepted documents to the Tokyo War Crime trial as evidence of Japan's nefarious scheme against the Soviet Union.¹² An August 1932 OGPU report noted that politically 'the most tense' regions with the strongest 'anti-Soviet activity' were the North Caucasus and Kazakhstan (Danilov *et al.* 2001, p. 445).

To complicate the matter for the Soviet Union, Japan and Poland cooperated closely in intelligence against the Soviet Union, a cooperation that had started at the time of the Russo–Japanese War and continued into World War II (Peplowski & Kuromiya forthcoming). The Soviet Union's grave concern about Japan was evident even in Ukraine, thousands of miles from Japan. The Soviet Army conducted military manoeuvres in Ukraine from 30 August to 4 September 1934, according to the Polish Consul in Kiev, as 'a demonstration against foreign countries, particularly Japan' (Włodarkiewicz 2002, p. 132).

The anti-Soviet activities of foreign countries disquieted Moscow, which intensified its terror against the suspected and potential foreign agents. The terror, in turn, only aggravated the famine in the regions. After the famine, at the Seventeenth Party Congress in early 1934, Stalin asked a question: which presents the greater danger, Great Russian nationalism or local nationalism? Then he gave his answer:

In Ukraine, only very recently, the Ukrainian nationalist deviation did not represent the chief danger. But when the fight against it ceased and it was allowed to grow to such an extent that it linked up with the interventionists, this deviation became the chief danger. (Stalin 1953, p. 362).

This is probably why he began to attack Ukrainianisation in December 1932. Stalin's discussion of the link between Ukrainian nationalism and the 'interventionists' (anti-Soviet *émigrés* and foreign powers) suggests that Stalin reckoned that Ukrainian

¹²The National Archives and Records Administration (College Park, MD), RG331, Numerical Evidentiary Documents Assembled as Evidence by the Prosecution for Use before the International Military Tribunal for the Far East. Some of these documents in the original Japanese are collected in Awaya and Takeuchi [1999, vol. 1, doc. 12 (1929) and vol. 2, doc. 56 (1932)].

nationalism *per se* was not a grave threat, but that when it appeared to work closely with the ‘interventionists’ (who were activated by the famine crisis in the Soviet Union), it began to pose a serious political threat to the Soviet Union.

This interesting speech by Stalin is open to different interpretations. It may mean that even though Stalin may not have caused the famine intentionally, once it started he used it deliberately to terrorise suspected Ukrainian nationalists and their potential supporters (Ukrainian peasants). Yet Stalin must have known that even though Poland used Ukrainians, it did not trust them politically. Poland surely would have rather used the ethnic Poles in Ukraine for its ‘interventionist’ purposes. Poland did take close note of the ethnic Poles in Ukraine and compiled detailed records of them to be used in case of need.¹³ Therefore in 1933 Moscow began to attack the ethnic Poles and their leaders as subversive elements by fabricating the case of the ‘POW’ (the ‘Polish Military Organisation’, *Polska organizacja wojskowa*) (Iwanow 1991, pp. 141–45). By comparison, the ethnic Ukrainians must have appeared to Stalin much more reliable politically. It is possible that Stalin nevertheless believed that the Ukrainians might favour Warsaw over Moscow in the event of war.

In the above-mentioned 11 August 1932 letter to Kaganovich, Stalin in fact emphasised the Polish factor:

Keep in mind that Piłsudski is not daydreaming, his agents in Ukraine are many times stronger than Redens or Kosior thinks. Keep in mind also that the Ukrainian Communist Party (500,000 members, ha-ha) has no small (yes, no small!) number of rotten elements, conscious and unconscious Petliurites, and, finally, direct agents of Piłsudski. (Khlevnyuk *et al.* 2001, p. 291)¹⁴

Stalin then emphasised the need to strengthen Ukraine, particularly its *border* districts, in economic and political terms, otherwise ‘we may lose Ukraine’ (Khlevnyuk *et al.* 2001, p. 291, emphasis Stalin’s). One should not take Stalin’s assertions on foreign agents at face value; yet they do reveal Stalin’s concern about foreign threat and foreign influence. The shadow of Poland was evident in Soviet Ukraine. Whatever the case, the foreign factor thus needs to be taken into consideration to understand the famine in its historical context.

Conclusion

It is not known whether somewhere in the archives of the former Soviet Union there lies buried a smoking gun that will trigger a solution to the mysteries of the Great Famine. Available evidence examined here points to the following preliminary conclusions. Although Stalin intentionally let starving people die, it is unlikely that he intentionally caused the famine to kill millions of people. It is also unlikely that Stalin used famine as a cheap alternative to deportation. True, the famine affected Ukraine

¹³See, for example, the 1932 records of the Polish Military Intelligence (*dwójka*), captured after World War II by the Soviet Army and now available in the *Rossiskii gosudarstvennyi voennyi arkhiv, f. 308k, op. 3, d. 257*.

¹⁴At the time Redens was the head of the secret police in Ukraine, Kosior the head of the Ukrainian Communist Party.

severely; true, too, that Stalin distrusted the Ukrainian peasants and Ukrainian nationalists. Yet not enough evidence exists to show that Stalin engineered the famine to punish specifically the ethnic Ukrainians. The famine did not take place in an international political vacuum. The sharp rise in the foreign threat was likely to have been an important aggravating factor.

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